

Product Design, Technology, and Social Change

A Short Cultural History

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The word ‘product’ is ambiguous because one could say any output from a designer is a product. We tend to think of a product as something physical, but actually, banks offer products like a savings plan. And so, a product is actually something one delivers to a people that will change their lives. They are useful in life, and they have value. That is one of the greatest benefits of design; designers create products that actually make a difference in people’s lives. You really should not be trying to make the prettiest computer, cell phone, or device in the world. You should be doing something that really solves the problems that people have. It is the most important component of what designers do.

With design, we are trying to change people’s behaviour for the good. But we have to realize that people are part of a complex system in the world and we all interact with each other, and the things that we make can have other kinds of implications. The product designer, no matter what kind of product they make, whether it is software or hardware or new ideas or new procedures, has to think about what are the *implications for society*, for humanity, and for the world? Does it destroy the ecosystem? Does it increase the inequities that exist in the world?

I had a really incredible range of students during the last part of 2021. A commonly asked question was where they could work to make a difference in the world. The problem is when you take a job and try to say ‘no’ to building a product because it is going to damage the ecosystem, you might get fired. To make a difference, you either have to select a company very carefully or wait to move up in the hierarchy. This demonstrates the importance of having more designers at high levels of decision-making. Even in the universities, the design department is not always well regarded. It is situated in the arts, and it is unknown what to do with it. If you list all the important departments, you might list art and design, but you almost never list design by itself. Why is that? Very seldom do you have a designer at the top level of a company, a chief design officer who is in the C-suite who actually meets with the people who are making the important decisions for a company.

One of the few companies that does this is the company Phillips, which is located in the Netherlands and has global offices. Nowadays, it is focused almost entirely

on health technologies. The design officer meets with the CEO regularly, and their job is not to make a design look ‘pretty’. Their job is to figure out what the company ought to be doing, and how they should do it. But that is rare. Designers are not at the table saying what they think ought to be done. Designers are often told what the product is after it is already too late to make a difference. Why were designers not involved earlier? It is a rare company where that is possible. It also means we have to take into account business, economics, finance, the sales cycle, marketing, and sales. One also has to understand supply chains and understand where materials come from, and what happens when a product becomes obsolete.

Some of the very first ‘designers’ were in companies like Wedgwood in England. Some of the Wedgwood apprentices and craftspeople were painters. They did not have much input into what was being made and how the pottery was created. But they made a big difference. They took expensive dishware for the wealthy and remade it inexpensively for middle- and low-income people. It is the nature of capitalism.

What we do today often depends on what we have done in the past. Today we are doing things that destroy the environment. We are doing things that destroy people’s lives. We are manufacturing products in factories that are really horrible. We go to other countries where the cost of labour is low, and people are not treated very well. We make products that basically force people into the western way of thinking and behaving. We do not always think of it that way, because highly educated people make these products. It is important to recognize the inequities that are being created and to recognize people with disabilities, indigenous people, and people from different classes.

It is not going to be easy to solve these problems. For example, the upsetting thing about climate change is that it is already happening, destroying crops, and people are dying. We have heat waves and we have floods, we have droughts, and we have hunger. People are going after the short-term, as opposed to the long-term benefit, because it is going to take 10–20 years to change the climate. That is the bad part. The good part is that people are now being forced to take it seriously.

Studying the history of the world is very important. Every country is different. Every culture is different. What you grow up with you might assume is normal and natural. A product designer might think they are building something new. The notion of ‘new’ is actually very much altered by what you have been doing with your life. It is difficult to not rely on previous thoughts or actions when it is necessary to do something in an unfamiliar way. When I take a look at the famous product designers normally studied in product design history, that is not what is important. What is important is how design evolved over the thousands of years before ‘designers’ existed.